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At least 9 right whale pairs spotted off Southeastern coast this season

- **By Shamira McCray** smccray@postandcourier.com
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This season's North Atlantic right whale calf production has already exceeded that of the last four years, with nearly three months remaining in the calving season.

NOAA Fisheries spokeswoman Allison Garrett said nine mother-and-calf pairs have been spotted this season off the East Coast from North Carolina to Florida. Thirty-three other right whales, including 14 potential moms, have also been seen.

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Marine mammal experts say this is great news, as right whales are one of the world's most endangered species of large whales. It is believed that 400 right whales remain, and only about 100 of them are breeding females.

The calving news comes as conservation groups filed suit Wednesday against the federal government, saying it has taken too long to act on proposals to expand protections for the critically endangered right whale species.

The lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., says the National Marine Fisheries Service for more than eight years has ignored conservationists' petitions seeking greater speed limit restrictions on ships along the East Coast, where the rare whales' range extends from Maine to Florida.

Scientists say collisions with ships are one of the greatest threats to a species considered dangerously close to extinction. Last year, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration estimated the population of North Atlantic right whales has dropped below 370. The previous year's estimate was 412.

Lauren Rust, founder of the Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network, said although the nine calves produced this year isn't a large amount, not many deaths have been reported this year.

NOAA Fisheries reports only one dead right whale calf so far this season. The reported calf was stranded on the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

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"You always want to have a positive, right, more calves than you have deaths," Rust said. "But you know, this season is still really young and the animals are at a constant threat."

Rust said whales have a high risk of entanglements and ship strikes, which is a reason they are critically endangered. She said the mammals are not repopulating themselves, let alone growing.

In addition to the right whale, Charleston's coast is not a stranger to other species. Rust said a humpback whale was seen off Kiawah Island two weeks ago. The mammals can often hug the shoreline, especially if they have a calf.

Since 2008, the government has imposed speed limits on larger vessels in Atlantic waters in areas and periods of the year when right whales are frequently seen. The largest areas are off the coast of New England, where right whales feed and mate from spring into fall, and off the Carolinas, Georgia and northern Florida, where pregnant females migrate each winter to give birth.

The conservationists' lawsuit says the existing restrictions aren't good enough.

"The clock is running out for right whales, and further delay is unacceptable," Kristen Monsell, oceans legal director at the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement.

The center filed the lawsuit along with the groups Whale and Dolphin Conservation, Defenders of Wildlife and Conservation Law Foundation.

The conservationists are asking a federal judge to force the National Marine Fisheries Service to issue a decision on petitions they filed seeking expanded protections in 2012 and again in August.

They want speed limits imposed on vessels smaller than 65 feet long, which are currently exempt. They are also seeking expanded speed-limit zones in some areas and for reduced speeds to become mandatory in certain cases where they are now voluntary.

Garrett said the agency does not comment on pending litigation.